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SUBJECT: Polling Shows Street Name Fury

Ref: Minsk 1143

¶1. Summary: According to the NOVAK opinion polling for June, 42.3 percent of Belarusians would vote for President Aleksandr Lukashenko, down 0.1 percent since April. The opposition candidate posing the greatest threat to Lukashenko, UCP leader Anatoli Lebedko, would receive 1.0 percent of the vote in a hypothetical election (with an unlimited pool of candidates; the numbers would be different in any one-on-one match-up). The majority of the population favors union with Russia, but the biggest issue for Belarusians recently has been the renaming of two major streets in the capital. End Summary.

¶2. Poloffs met with Andrey Vardomatsky, head of the NOVAK polling service, on July 12. Vardomatsky presented the results of his latest poll conducted nationwide between May 24 and June 4. The poll included 1282 respondents.

Lukashenko Maintains the Lead

¶3. The past month has shown little change in Lukashenko's support, with 42.3 percent of Belarusians saying they would vote for him. However, the percentage of respondents who would vote against him has dropped from 21.8 in April to 18.0 in early June. This is the lowest his negative rating has been for at least two and a half years. Trust in the president has risen from 53.8 percent in April to 56.1 percent in June.

¶4. Again, no other figure in Belarus would receive more than one percent of the vote in an open election (NOVAK did not conduct test ballot pairings). Potential opposition presidential candidate and UCP leader Anatoly Lebedko leads the pack with 1.0 percent. Sergei Gaidukevich, leader of the non-liberal and non-democratic Liberal Democratic Party would receive 0.7 percent, and 2001 presidential candidate Vladimir Goncharik of the Belarusian Federation of Trade Unions, who left the political scene after his 2001 defeat, would get 0.5 percent. [Note: Even though there is a 3 percent margin of error, Lebedko and Gaidukevich usually top the list after Lukashenko.]

¶5. Comment: Almost half of poll respondents consistently respond it is hard to say for whom they would vote if the

presidential election were to be held soon. In response to these questions, 45.7 percent (45.5 in April, 47.3 in March, 44.8 in February) could not give an answer of which candidate they would choose. This points to a large mass of people who are unhappy with Lukashenko, but do not see any alternatives.

Life's a Bit Better

¶16. Those who view the current economic situation as fair have increased from 52.5 percent to 56.0 percent, while those who view it as bad have dropped by 3.9 percent to 19.4 percent. 15.3 percent believe that the economic situation on the whole has worsened in the last month, and 22.0 percent believe that their personal standard of living has dropped. The overwhelming majority, however, at 62.9 on the whole and 66.2 percent personally, see no changes since April.

Europe or Russia?

¶17. Opinions on whether it is better to live in union with Russia or with the European Union have not changed significantly over the last month, with 50.5 percent choosing union with Russia (up from 49.2) and 31.3 percent choosing union with the EU (down from 32.8). If a vote were to be held today, 37.5 percent of respondents said they would vote to join the EU, with 26.5 percent voting against. Showing no significant changes, 52.4 percent said that they would vote for unification of Belarus and Russia, while 22.0 percent would oppose it.

Apathy Rampant, but Slightly Down

¶18. When asked if public demonstrations against price rises or a fall of living standards would take place in their town or district, 71.0 percent of respondents viewed this as unlikely and 67.6 percent said they would not partake in them. These figures are down marginally from 73.2 percent and 68.8 percent in April.

Street Name Changes Not Well Received

¶19. The biggest current cause of concern for participants in the poll is the recent presidential decree changing the name of Masherov Avenue in Minsk to Pobeditelei (Victors) Avenue and F. Skaryni Avenue to Nezavisimosti (Independence) Avenue. [Note: Masherov and Skaryni are historical figures renowned by many Belarusians.] Although 39.8 percent of those asked had not previously known about the decree, the majority of poll participants disapproved of the name changes. Percentages were higher among those who were already aware of the decree.

¶10. When asked about their attitude to the renaming of Skaryni Avenue, Belarusians responded:

	% of all	% of those knowing
Approve	12.7	16.3
Disapprove	52.9	68.1
Don't Know/Hard to Say	34.5	15.6

¶11. Results were similar for the renaming of Masherov Avenue:

	% of all	% of those knowing
Approve	11.6	14.4
Disapprove	54.9	70.1
Don't Know/Hard to Say	33.5	15.5

¶12. Despite Lukashenko's assurances that his decree was in response to repeated requests by veterans, few believe that is the reason for the renaming:

	% of all	% of those knowing
Owing to numerous requests of veterans and inhabitants of the capital	13.2	14.8
President's personal initiative	35.5	47.1
Other	4.8	6.3
Don't Know/Hard to Say	46.5	31.8

¶13. Comment: Lukashenko's renaming of Minsk's two main streets has been the root of a number of jokes and derogatory remarks at his expense. This poll shows a majority of Belarusians, not just in Minsk, oppose the renaming of these streets, and further place the blame for the move squarely on Lukashenko. However, aside from quiet mutterings, this has not turned into an overtly political issue. There have been a number of public protests against the renaming, but all were extremely small and largely consisted of the same usual suspects.

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